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ABSTRACT

This assumption that non-standard speakers are limited in their linguistic ability is examined based on a larger study investigating the speech of working-class adolescents in Sydney, Australia's inner-city areas. Speech samples of four children are presented. An examination of verbal structures reveals that there is a predominance of simple verbs; there are also multi-auxiliary verb structures. The production of these forms indicates that the speaker does have such a structure within the linguistic range. There is also evidence within all four speakers of ability to handle a wide range of possible structures, ranging from simple one or two clause sentences to the most complex of embedded structures, comprising up to ten clauses. The four non-standard speakers exhibit a sure control of a wide range of verbal and structural patterns in their spoken language. This proficiency with language exists alongside of a proliferation of popularly-stigmatized non-standard dialect forms. The children who exibited the greatest number of non-standard forms in their speech also used the most complex structures. Implications for teachers are cited. (SW)

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COMMENTS ON GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURES IN NON-STANDARD SPEAKERS

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There is a popular consensus within our community that non-standard speakers are limited in their linguistic ability. Even some teachers would hold the view that once a speaker evidences a non-standard dialect, with double negatives, non-standard verb forms and so on, he evidences, along with it, his own impoverished language. This paper looks closely at this question to see whether in fact there is any validity in such a view.

The four speakers whose language is being examined here were chosen randomly from a sample being used in a larger study investigating the speech of working-class adolescents in Sydney's inner-city area, so there is no reason to believe them atypical. All are Australian-born of Australian-born parents, and have lived in the inner-city working-class areas of Glebe-Leichhardt-Camperdown all their lives. Their parents have occupations relatively low in social status, for example, cleaner, millwright, bricklayer. All are female (although the larger sample contains an even balance of sexes) and were, at the time of the interviews, aged 13 years 8 months to 14 years 6 months, being in their second form of High School.

The children are all clearly non-standard speakers in that their language is liberally sprinkled with forms characteristic of the non-standard dialect. All speakers use past participle forms for the simple past tense. *Seen* for *saw*, *done* for *did*, *been* for *was* and the more ambiguous *come* for *came* are all present in the data in utterances like:

I told him what they done to me. (Tracy)

We went an seen David Cassidy. (Kerry)

Stephen come down to see where I lived. (Marion)

The only time I been a bit tipsy was when Tracy gimme all that whisky an gin. (Sandra)

Notice in this last example that the uninflected base form of the verb *give* is used to convey a past tense meaning. Occurrences of such uninflected base forms are found among all speakers with other verbs, for example, *go*, *say*, *bash*, *start* and *bring*.

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The inclusion of *bring* here is interesting in that, while it does occur in this uninflected base form in the example:

I wouldn't wear em after she bring em back anyway. (Sandra)

it also appears in the coined past tense form, *brung*, as in:

She never brung em no more. (Marion)

Other irregular verbs are regularised, so that we have instances of *fighted*, *speeded* and *hitted*:

The first-former fighted another girl in second form.
If she ever hitted me, she'd cry.

All informants use plural subjects with singular verbs, especially with the verb *be*, as in:

They wasn't allowed to look up. (Marion)
and singular subjects with plural verbs:
She don't like me doing it. (Tracy)

All four speakers use both single and double negation, but in varying proportions. While one child, Kerry, uses only one double negative in 15 possible occurrences, her companion, Marion, uses no less than 30 in 39 possible occurrences. So natural is the double negative to Marion that she corrects herself:

It doesn't work out anyway - it doesn't work out noways.

Noun phrase duplication of the type *My grandfather, he's 85....* is evident in the speech of all four adolescents, although here, too, there is much individual variation. Again, it is Marion who evidences the highest number of occurrences of this type (34) and Kerry, the lowest (7).

Generally, this duplication occurs when the noun phrase functions as the subject of the sentence, for example:

But me and her, we never speak. (Tracy)
but it can also occur when the noun phrase functions as the object in the sentence, as in:

One of my girlfriends, Sandra, well now they're after her.
or in order to indicate possession, as in:

My aunty, well her mother and brother-in-law, they live up there. (Marion)
Here, it is in fact the mother and brother-in-law of the aunt who are being referred to.

There are, of course, many other areas of grammatical and also lexical and phonological variation in the data. But, because of the over-all frequency of these non-standard forms and the consistency with which they are used - although in free variation with standard forms - this variation cannot be seen as random, but rather as indicating that these speakers are employing a non-standard dialect.

Given that these children are non-standard speakers, does this mean that their language is necessarily impoverished? Certainly, if you ask their teachers, they will tell you, as they told me, that these children, coming from "disadvantaged" backgrounds, lack the linguistic ability of their middle-class counterparts. Their language is seen to be deprived, disadvantaged, inadequate.

But is this necessarily so? If we look closely at the language they exhibit, how much complexity is there alongside the non-standard? What can they do with language at the verbal and structural level - or does the presence of a non-standard dialect necessarily mean their speech is limited?

Looking firstly at verbal structures, we find that while there is a predominance of simple verbs, a large number - something like 2 in 7 - contain at least one auxiliary. Even more interesting is the existence of multi-auxiliary verb structures in the data. Although the number of occurrences of each type of structure is generally not high, their production evidences that the speaker does have such a structure within her linguistic range.

A modal auxiliary is regularly combined with the perfective or progressive aspect to produce structures in all speakers such as:

It might've been those boys over there. (Kerry)

In a way I'm glad my mother doesn't let me smoke cause I'd be smoking real heavy. (Tracy)

Modals also occur in passive structures, so that we find examples such as:

If they found out I was smoking, I'd get killed. (Sandra)

Notice that the sentence in which the modal-passive structure is contained (as the previous modal-progressive example) has an adverbial-main clause pattern, evidencing that the speaker has control not only of a verb of some complexity but also of a subordinate sentence pattern.

Passive structures of either the *be* or *got* form are seen to combine with the perfective aspect as in:

I've been worried sick. (Sandra)

I haven't got asked yet. (Tracy)

and with the progressive in:

You think you're getting left out. (Marion)

The perfective-progressive aspect is regularly used, again not simply in main or co-ordinate clauses, but in more complex subordinate structures:

It's a place for girls who've been misbehaving. (Marion)

That's why I haven't been jigging. (Kerry)

She hasn't been getting on very well with my mother. (Tracy)

Notice that the last two of these examples are negated, adding yet one more factor to an already complex structure. Moreover, in a co-ordinated structure, the necessary deletion of subject and auxiliaries is competently handled:

She's been walking around Glebe and going to their places with a blanket wrapped around her. (Sandra)

When we move on to look closely at sentence structure, a similar pattern of complexity emerges. These non-standard speakers do not simply use short one clause sentences, or even linked co-ordinate clauses. Instead, there is evidence within all four speakers of ability to handle a wide range of possible structures, ranging from simple one or two clause sentences to the most complex of embedded structures, comprising up to ten clauses.

One of the girls, Tracy, had been talking about her sister, Vicki, and Vicki's friend, Leonie, and when asked if Leonie's obvious attractiveness bothered her sister, Tracy replied:

She says it does cause, when there's this real nice-looking guy that Vicki likes and she wants to go out with him or sumpin like that, and she's dying for him to ask her out, and when they see Leonie, they always ask her out.

What is remarkable about this sentence is that it is a tightly-knit structure in which nine of the ten clauses are dependent upon the one main clause. It begins simply with a main clause in which there is an embedded nominal object, followed by three groups of adverbials, two of time and one of reason. The first of these has its own three-part structure, co-ordinated together within the adverbial. In the first part, *when there's this real nice-looking guy that Vicki likes, that Vicki likes* is a relative clause post-modifying *guy*, and in each of the second and third parts, there is a non-finite clause functioning as the object. Thus we have six separate

clauses, all embedded within the one adverbial which is itself embedded into the final adverbial clause of reason, *cause ... they always ask her out*. Co-ordinated to this is another group in which the time adverbial clause, *when they see Leonie* is embedded. The complexity here is obvious.

Overall, most of the clauses used are main or co-ordinate (76.64%) but there are still 23.36% of adverbial, relative or noun clauses. Let us now look closely at several examples to see the kind of linguistic range displayed by these children. In presenting these few examples I am assuming that the ability to handle the more complex structure presupposes a grasp of the less complex. Thus, while there are numerous examples of, for instance, the main-adverbial-noun structure, or the main with embedded relative plus adverbial structure, I shall be concerned here with patterns more complex than these.

The first example comes from Marion, speaking about her father's strictness:

> *Well, for a start, I should be old enough to go out by myself, but he thinks I'm not, and for another thing, he thinks that I should look after the kids all the time, and he thinks I should do things which I don't think I should do.*

Here we have another ten clause pattern in which the first principal clause, *Well, for a start, I should be old enough to go out by myself,* comprises a finite main clause and a non-finite complement of the adjective, followed by three co-ordinate clauses, each of which have a finite noun clause functioning as the object. In addition, in the third co-ordinate clause, *and he thinks I should do things which I don't think I should do,* we have, within the nominal, a relative clause post-modifying the noun *thing,* within which another nominal clause, *I should do,* acts as the object. Here, too, the complexity is adeptly handled. The sentence is balanced and evidences ordered logical thinking.

The second example also comes from Marion:

> *Peter said he went because he thought that I still lived there, but Stephen said if he finds out where I'm living he's gunna come down an see me.*

The nine clauses in this structure are grouped into two major segments Within the first segment, *Peter said he went because he thought that I still lived there,* we have a main clause with an embedded nominal object and an adverbial clause of reason which also has an embedded nominal object. Within the second, *but Stephen said if he finds out where I'm living he's gunna come down an see me,* which itself has two co-ordinated nominal clauses for its object, we find an embedded adverbial of condition with a noun clause object. Again, the balance and control is obvious.

Marion's companion, Kerry, is telling a story about jigging school - truanting - when she says:

> *Anyhow we discovered we didn't have any money in our pockets so we walked down - about two miles we walked - down to this old church and we went there, and she tried to get in there because she thought there was a lady in there and she'd give us money.*

The nine clauses here are more loosely linked into five units: firstly, a principal clause with an embedded nominal object, then three short clauses, two co-ordinate and one parenthetical, followed finally by the

group, and she tried to get in there because she thought there was a lady in there and she'd give us money, which opens with a co-ordinate clause and has a non-finite complement of the verb and an adverbial of reason with two co-ordinated noun clauses functioning as its object.

The next example, from Sandra, is a six-clause structure:

When me grandmother was in hospital we looked after him, and when they went over the hospital we sat with him while they went over the hospital to see him.

Here we have an adverbial-main structure, followed by a co-ordinate clause which has two time adverbials, one embedded after the conjunction and one at the end, the latter having a non-finite adverbial clause of purpose embedded within it.

Sandra's companion, Tracy, used seven clauses in the following example:

And Gay, that's my eldest sister, she hasn't been getting on very well with my mother and she's going on a cruise at Christmas down New Zealand and that, and she said, when she comes back, she's gunna leave home, cause she hasn't got the money now.

The first three clauses here are simply co-ordinated, but the fourth, *and she said, when she comes back, she's gunna leave home, cause she hasn't got the money now,* embodies two adverbials, one of time embedded before the noun clause and one of reason at the end, all of which function as the object of the verb *said.*

Tracy rather likes these embedded clauses as we can see in the following seven-clause structure:

And that night, you know, I was really scared and that cause my mother said I'm gunna be in worse trouble tomorrow when she finds out the truth about what happened, but she never ended up finding it out.

Here we have a two-part structure. The first part, which is the more complex, is made up of a main, *And that night, you know, I was really scared and that,* and an adverbial of reason, *cause my mother said I'm gunna be in worse trouble tomorrow when she finds out the truth about what happened,* within which a nominal clause functions as the object, and within that nominal, an adverbial of time is embedded, and within that adverbial, another clause, *about what happened,* post-modifies *the truth.* Onto all this is joined a co-ordinate clause with a non-finite clause complementing the verb.

Clearly, then, at least these four non-standard speakers exhibit a sure control of a wide range of verbal and structural patterns in their spoken language. But note that this proficiency with language exists *alongside of* a proliferation of popularly-stigmatised non-standard dialect forms of the kind outlined at the beginning of this paper.

Indeed, in this study, it is those children who exhibit the greatest number of non-standard forms in their speech who also use the most complex structures. It is Marion - the speaker, you will remember, who uses the highest percentage of double negatives (77%) and the greatest amount of noun phrase duplication, who evidences, along with Tracy, the highest proportion of subordination - both use 24.29%. It is Marion, too, who uses the largest number of passives - 44 occurrences. And it is Kerry, who uses the fewest double negatives - only one in 15 possible occurrences - who is the most standard of all the speakers in the area of verbal agreement and who uses the *lowest* degree of subordination - only 18.14%.

The picture is clearly not as simple as the popular consensus would have us believe. These non-standard speakers can handle complexity in their spoken language - yet their teachers may well judge them solely on the basis of the popularly-stigmatised forms they exhibit, and continue to see them as inadequate, if not illiterate - *and* teach them accordingly. Yet clearly, these children and others like them require very different teaching from those speakers - non-standard or standard - who do not exhibit such complexity.

To be fair, their teachers perhaps never see - or hear - this kind of sophistication in their students' language. In the interviews where this data was collected, the children were in a relatively relaxed situation, speaking about topics close to their own experience and about which they had thought deeply. It is this clear-sighted understanding which is reflected in their language. They know what they want to say and perceive the relationships within the whole - be it in a narrative, a personal opinion or whatever - and it is this depth of understanding which is not always present in their school language. Perhaps the areas of classroom meanings are too remote - certainly there is a gap between the way they think and talk here and what they produce in the classroom.

For teachers, this presents a challenging problem: how to encourage these children to bring to the classroom the same critical insight and logic that they bring to understanding their own world - and the fluency and control of language which goes with it? How indeed to bridge this gap between the way they think and talk here and what they produce in the classroom?

It is a problem over which we might well ponder.